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How to Win the War for Talent: Ten Ways to Hire—and Keep—the Brightest in PR

PR recruiter says the squeeze for PR talent will continue in the year ahead—and offers ten quick tips for attracting, retaining and training only the best.

Op-Ed by Karen Bloom, Principal; Bloom, Gross & Associates

From mid-2000 until late 2003, the economy was in the doldrums. We had the tech bust that followed a tremendous tech boom. We had the tragedy of 9/11 and we had a recession that was never actually called that, but which sure felt like one. Hiring in general slowed down and in some sectors, came to almost a complete stop. Certainly, we were not recruiting as many young people into PR agencies (the best training ground for future PR leaders) and many corporate communications departments had long ago stopped hiring people at low levels anyway. Layoffs were felt at all levels, but particularly at senior levels, at both agencies and corporations.

Things have changed since early 2004. The economy has stabilized and budgets have been restored or increased for communications projects. However, until recently, spending on new jobs was kept to a minimum as employers cautiously managed their workforce expenditures. This contributed greatly to a feeling that all companies were doing more with less.

As is so often the case, perception and reality take some time to find each other. We are now seeing a much more energized job market with many of the restraints, felt by employers, falling away. Employers, especially PR agencies, need to staff up and they now want to hire the best and the brightest.

But where are the people? Ah, yes, the war for talent that “they” have been predicting for years is finally being felt.

So how can you compete in the marketplace for the talent you need? Here are ten ideas to consider:

1. Make sure you have a strong employment brand and get the word out far and wide.
2. Examine your college recruiting strategies to make sure they are the best in class.
3. Put your money where your mouth is—support scholarships and internships.
4. Be creative in how you approach diversity hiring, and make it a priority.
5. Spend more time in on-boarding new employees to ensure that they have a very positive experience from day one.

6. Ask your top talent to recommend their friends, and be sure your employee referral program is well managed and offers proper incentives.
7. When necessary, use reputable outside recruiters to assist you in finding that “needle in a haystack” candidate.
8. If the position will allow you to, hire for attributes and train.
9. Try to keep your Baby Boomers—if they will stay in the job market, this will be a huge help to offset current and predicted talent shortages.
10. Offer flexible work schedules when and where you can.

One last thing that agencies might want to start looking at now—as this trend will certainly continue for the next ten years or so—is the hierarchical structure that most agencies ascribe to. Creating flatter organizations and using more senior level people in flexible roles as sort of “SWAT team” project members may be the best way to serve your clients in the future.

Don’t let those senior people retire or those “moms” quit. Offer them a unique and flexible way to stay involved with your company. The level of skill that you will offer your clients with a redesigned organization will be unbeatable and the training that will be offered to your new and junior employees will be invaluable.

Remember, it is a war out there—prepare for the battle.

Karen Bloom is the principal of Bloom, Gross & Associates, Inc., an executive search consulting firm specializing in the national recruitment of marketing and communications professionals. She formed the company in 1988 with Barbara Gross, who retired from the firm in 1993. Karen remains its principal and contributes over 20 years of experience to the firm.

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